DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 730 CS 202 583

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TITLE Evaluating Teaching Methods in Composition.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (26th, St. Louis, Missouri, March 13-15, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Composition (Literary); *Composition Skills (Literary); *Course Evaluation; English; Higher Education; *Learning Laboratories; Programed Tutoring; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Laboratories

ABSTRACT

In assessing the evaluation of student compositions, it is evident that even when objectives for freshman composition are established, there is little agreement or consistency among faculty regarding the transfer of these objectives into operational terms. A study conducted at Eastern Kentucky University compared the long term effects of two instructional methods on the achievement and attrition rate of 244 students enrolled in the 1970 fall freshman class. Subjects, first semester freshmen who had scored in the bottom decile on the English section of the American College Test, were randomly enrolled in the writing lab--a lengthened time, tutoring approach--or in remedial English, taught by lecture and discussion in one semester. Effects of these courses showed no difference between the two methods with regard to attrition, but significantly greater achievement by students in the writing laboratory, indicating that transfeered writing skill does assert itself after the freshman year. (Tables illustrating the study are included.) (JM)

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CS 202 583

EVALUATING TEACHING METHODS IN COMPOSITION

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Regardless of the method of teaching, freshman composition is often a headache to the faculty of English departments. To faculty in other disciplines, composition is an enigma; to administrators, a nemesis; and to students (according to Greenbaum and Schmerl, 1970), a course which the "freshman can walk into. . .as into a wall." To the would-be evaluator, not to mention the die-hard statistician, composition can be--quite frankly--a nightmare. As Greenbaum and Schmerl point out, a college composition course can consist of any of the following:

Reading and Writing
Rhetoric
Traditional Grammar
Functional Grammar
Literature
Communication
Speech
Logic
Style
Semantics
Social Studies
Soul--the students' or the instructor's--

Given the possible component elements of a composition course, evaluation becomes a staggering problem. Even when the method is specified and the course objectives are clearly defined, personal preference and expertise often determine what is actually taught, as well as what is brought to bear upon the evaluation of student compositions. Objectives for composition courses often appear to impose limits upon class activities and, ultimately upon evaluation as in the following example:

The primary concern in English 101 is written composition. Proficiency in language communication is developed through the student's own carefully directed activity. To improve the student's reading and writing, the following objectives have been established.

I. Writing: to aid students in acquiring proficiency in the skills of written communication by involving them in purposeful activities

   A. Learning the characteristics of effective sentence structure and various types of sentences

   B. Learning the characteristics of effective paragraphs and various types of paragraph development

   C. Selecting and restricting subjects for themes and developing statements of purpose

   D. Learning the types of outlines, the conventions of outlining, and the use of outlines

   E. Practicing correctness in grammar, punctuation, and spelling

   F. Demonstrating writing proficiency in papers ranging in length from 200-600 words, each of which illustrates a different type of development

II. Reading: to aid students in improving their writing skills by participating in appropriate reading activities

   A. Reading and analyzing expository prose and imaginative literature

   B. Learning that reading is an aid to improving one's vocabulary and to mastering the art of writing

   C. Identifying minor reading problems

-actual objectives of unidentified institution

Most of us would agree that objectives such as these are enough in terms of guidelines; nevertheless, results from evaluation of student themes are often erratic, indicating that considerations other than the objectives are involved or that there is disagreement in interpretation of the objectives in operational terms. The following example is a reproduction of a chart distributed within the same department whose objectives were just presented.

RESULTS OF DEPARTMENTAL THEME CORRECTIONS

	Theme # 1					Theme # 2					Theme # 3				
	A	B	C	D	F	A	B	C	D	F	A	B	C	D	F
FULL-TIME STAFF 37 Responding		1	8	21	10		2	10	15	12	16	20	3	2	
PART-TIME STAFF 5 Responding			2	2	1			3	3		1	4			
TEACHING ASSISTANTS 5 Responding			1	2	2	1		2	1	1	3	2			
TOTAL 47 Responding		1	11	25	13	1	2	15	19	13	20	26	3	2	

If the course objectives were applied in this theme rating experiment, there was little agreement or consistency among the faculty regarding the transfer of the objectives into operational terms during the process of evaluation.

These theme rating results are not unique. Paul B. Diederich (1974) records that in one experiment involving 300 essays rated on a scale of 1-9, 101 papers received every grade from 1-9; 94 percent of all the papers received either 7, 8, or 9 different grades; and no essay received less than five different grades from the 53 readers.

Both Diederich and Siegel (1956) propose theme rating procedures that can, with in-service training of instructors, produce a higher correlation in the results than these examples. Before looking at their suggestions, another aspect of evaluation needs to be considered. Whether we really like to admit it or not, composition courses are often service courses. Nearly all of us have told our students that without the ability to express themselves in writing, they may find the road to a college degree an impasse. If what we say is actually true, then we must be willing to evaluate that aspect of our programs. We have done only half the job when we look at the immediate results achieved at the end of a composition course.

Implicit in the stated objectives which we looked at a few minutes ago is the concept of transferred writing skill. If transferred writing skill is even partial justification for composition courses, then that area must be evaluated. A pilot study which I conducted at Eastern Kentucky University over a two-year period indicates that indeed transferred writing skill reveals itself in the performance of students beyond the freshman level. A brief overview of that study may illustrate the point and, at the same time, present a model for evaluation.

The purpose of the study at Eastern Kentucky University was to compare the long-term effects of the writing laboratory and remedial English upon the achievement and attrition rate of 244 students enrolled in the freshman class in the Fall, 1970 (Sutton and Arnold, 1974). Since the primary concern was with the degree of improved writing skill transferred from the first semester of freshman English to subsequent course work, the effects were measured at the end of two academic years.

Subjects for the study were first-semester freshmen who had scored in the bottom decile on the English section of the American College Test. All of these students were considered to have severely deficient communication skills and were judged to be underprepared for regular course work in English. The students were randomly enrolled into two methods: 110 were enrolled in the Writing Laboratory, a lengthened-time, tutoring approach; and 134 were enrolled in remedial English sections taught by lecture-discussion within the confines of one semester.

The research design used in testing for the effects of the two methods was a Post-test Only Control Group design, with laboratory students composing the experimental group and remedial students, the control group (see Campbell and Stanley, 1966). Three classification variables were used: treatment (the two methods), sociological orientation (rural, inner-city, suburban), and degree goal (two-year and four-year). Both treatment groups were further dichotomized on the attrition variable, allowing for a separation of retained students from dropouts. Criterion measures were English Grade Point Average, Overall Grade Point Average, and retention rate. The data were analyzed with a three-way analysis of covariance in which predicted English and Overall averages were used as covariates. Covariance was used

in order to offset the bias of random enrollment. The .05 level of confidence was preselected for rejection of the null hypotheses. Retention statistics for the previous decade at the university provided the base for comparison of effects upon attrition. These effects were measured separately with a two-by-two Chi square test.

Results of the three-way analysis of covariance indicated that the experimental group (Writing Laboratory) achieved significantly higher English Grade Point Averages, with respect to both retained students and dropouts, than the control group (remedial English). Overall Grade Point Averages were also significantly higher for the experimental group, with the exception of the laboratory students who dropped out of college within the two-year period. The variable of sociological orientation produced significant main effects in both methods, with suburban students having an average achievement level higher than that of rural students. The degree goal variable produced significant main effects in favor of four-year students in both methods, but, along with sociological orientation, produced no interactive effects. As for attrition, both methods had a measureable effect, with a 20 percent increase over the expected rate. The Chi square test of retentions produced a test statistic of .001 and was not significant.

Although there was no difference between the two methods with regard to attrition, the Writing Laboratory proved to be significantly more effective than remedial English upon achievement. At the end of two years, the mean achievement level of the experimental group was above the cut-off point for academic probation, while the control group mean was below.

The criterion measures, English Grade Point Average and Overall Grade Point Average, may have been insensitive to the immediate content and timing of the two methods, but they proved adequate in testing for the existence of long-term effects upon academic performance. The following tables illustrate the procedure used in the study. (Pages 8-12).

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

	SAMPLE n = 244					
	Rural		Inner-City		Suburban	
TREATMENTS	2-year Degree	4-year Degree	2-year Degree	4-year Degree	2-year Degree	4-year Degree
Writing Laboratory	n = 16	n = 30	n = 9	n = 22	n = 5	n = 28
Remedial English	n = 33	n = 36	n = 9	n = 16	n = 13	n = 27

Dependent Variables: English Grade Point Average and Overall Grade Point Average

Covariates: Predicted EPGA and predicted OGPA

PREDICTED AND ACTUAL CELL MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR RETAINED STUDENTS
ENGLISH GRADE POINT AVERAGE

N = 111

TREATMENT		Rural 2-year Degree	Rural 4-year Degree	Inner-City 2-year Degree	Inner-City 4-year Degree	Suburban 2-year Degree	Suburban 4-year Degree
Writing Laboratory	PE	1.41	1.25	1.25	1.22	1.29	1.19
	SD	0.23	0.30	0.34	0.42	0.70	0.34
	AE	1.73	1.80	2.00	1.95	1.44	1.74
	SD	0.53	0.45	0.00	0.69	0.50	0.50
Remedial English	PE	1.12	1.33	1.13	1.17	1.27	1.21
	SD	0.47	0.47	0.33	0.31	0.46	0.41
	AE	0.81	1.27	0.60	1.01	0.97	1.35
	SD	0.53	0.76	0.54	0.45	0.60	0.71

PE--Predicted English Grade Point Average
AE--Actual English Grade Point Average
SD--Standard Deviation

PREDICTED AND ACTUAL CELL MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR RETAINED STUDENTS
OVERALL GRADE POINT AVERAGE

N = 111

TREATMENT		Rural 2-year Degree	Rural 4-year Degree	Inner-City 2-year Degree	Inner-City 4-year Degree	Suburban 2-year Degree	Suburban 4-year Degree
Writing Laboratory	PO	1.94	1.91	1.82	1.74	1.53	1.79
	SD	0.17	0.19	0.21	0.40	0.05	0.33
	AO	2.01	2.20	2.04	2.27	1.46	2.19
	SD	0.56	0.29	0.40	0.64	0.70	0.62
Remedial English	PO	1.77	1.87	1.86	1.77	1.88	1.85
	SD	0.21	0.25	0.21	0.17	0.22	0.24
	AO	1.64	2.09	1.64	2.08	1.91	2.05
	SD	0.54	0.39	0.45	0.47	0.41	0.37

PO--Predicted Overall Grade Point Average
AO--Actual Overall Grade Point Average
SD--Standard Deviation

THREE-WAY ANALYSIS OF COVARIANCE OF ENGLISH GPA
RETAINED STUDENTS

Source of Variation	Degrees of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Treatment (T)	1	13.6479	13.6479	42.4063*
Sociological Orientation (S)	2	.0142	.0071	.0221
Degree Goal (D)	1	1.8098	1.0898	5.6232**
T x S	2	1.5012	.7506	2.3323
T x D	1	.3299	.3299	1.0251
S x D	2	.1050	.0525	.1632
T x S x D	2	.1180	.0590	.1832
Experimental Error	98	2.5744	.3218	
Total	109	20.104		

*Significant at the .0001 level of confidence
**Significant at the .0197 level of confidence

THREE-WAY ANALYSIS OF COVARIANCE OF OVERALL GPA
RETAINED STUDENTS

Source of Variation	Degrees of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Treatment (T)	1	.8664	.8664	4.4341*
Sociological Orientation (S)	2	.1626	.0813	.4160
Degree Goal (D)	1	2.4969	2.4969	12.7791**
T x S	2	.1666	.0833	.4362
T x D	1	.0039	.0039	.0200
S x D	2	.0544	.0272	.1394
T x S x D	2	.3394	.1697	.8683
Experimental Error	98	19.1492	.1954	
Total	109	23.2394		

*Significant at the .0378 level of confidence
**Significant at the .0006 level of confidence

This study at Eastern Kentucky University proves conclusively that—for the population sample involved--transferred writing skill does assert itself after the freshman year. Although Grade Point Average may adequately measure the existence of skill transfer, it measures neither the extent nor the direction of the transfer. Thus, the most significant finding of this study is that adequate measurement of any composition method must be two-fold: at the end of the course in question and again at the end of a predetermined period of time. While this may appear to be a monumental undertaking, inferential statistics can simplify the evaluation since a random sample of 30 students is usually sufficient in measuring both the immediate and long-term effects of any teaching method.

Before any evaluation of a method can be done, it is necessary that the techniques of theme rating be as consistent as possible within a given department. In Chapter 10 of Diederich's Measuring Growth in English (1974), the author explains how he initiated staff grading of test essays and managed to raise an unacceptable correlation of .30 to an impressive correlation of .50. Appendix A of Diederich's book includes the following chart:

Topic_____Reader_____Paper_____

	Low		Middle		High	
Ideas	2	4	6	8	10	
Organization	2	4	6	8	10	
Wording	1	2	3	4	5	
Flavor	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Usage	1	2	3	4	5	
Punctuation	1	2	3	4	5	
Spelling	1	2	3	4	5	
Handwriting	1	2	3	4	5	_____
					Sum	_____

Not only is this theme rating chart simple and efficient, but it lends itself easily to statistical analysis. *For those who want to achieve consistency in theme rating by using a more sophisticated approach, it might be helpful to look at Chapter 9 of Siegel's Nonparametric Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences (1956). In this chapter, the author describes the use of Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance:W, a nonparametric test in which a high or significant value of W may be interpreted to mean that the judges are applying essentially the same standards in ranking the objects under study. It may not really be necessary to use a test such as this, since differences in theme rating of more than a letter grade are significant without a nonparametric test. To be sure, large differences are significant to the students involved.

I am convinced that a theme rating form such as Diederich's is adequate for attempts to achieve consistency in departmental theme ratings. In addition, this form can be used as an evaluation tool in rating random samples. If an entire composition program is being evaluated, results from this form can be subjected to an analysis of variance between first and last themes written by the students selected in the random sample. The follow-up study would repeat the procedure, this time between the last theme in a course and an essay written at the end of the sophomore year. If such a study were conducted with a large amount of professionalism and a small amount of expertise in evaluation, I am convinced that the results would not only provide positive reinforcement for every instructor and student involved, but would also furnish indisputable evidence that directed writing activity is a necessity at the freshman level.

*Permission to use Diederich's chart was granted by the author

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